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ABSTRACT

Ethnographic research projects have surged in recent years and are well represented in Research in the Teaching of English (RTE) bibliographies. However, methods texts were written for social scientists and anthropologists, not for writing researchers. Methods texts and rhetoric programs' general grounding in positivistic research imply that collected data is representative, reliable, and whole. It is hard to see that "writing it down" is interpretive; that all research relies on tropes, researcher personas, and persuasions; and that all research methods and research reports are rhetorical. Moving from the hard data of interview transcripts to the "warm" shaped descriptions, it is impossible not to see the subjective nature of the enterprise. "Writing it up" proves to be more problematic than "writing it down," since "writing up" an ethnographic narrative includes creating a believable and interesting authorial identity. To become a convincing "I" is a primary task of all writing research ethnographers, yet the "I" of the dissertation is rarely convincing. Writing researchers, then, have yet to write the necessary research meta-narratives--the discussions of how ethnographic research actually gets completed and accepted. These would help guide the new graduate program ethnographer. Tales about tales already abound in anthropological ethnography and need to be encouraged in writing research. Reliable and valid stories are possible and needed, as well as stories of writing it down, writing it up, telling where authors went and what was thought about all along the way. (Seventeen references are attached.) (TD)

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Reliable and Valid Stories?--
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> If there is any way to counter the conception of ethnography as an iniquitous act or an unplayable game, it would seem to involve owning up to the fact that, like quantum mechanics or the Italian opera, it is a work of the imagination, less extravagant than the first, less methodical than the second. (140) Clifford Geertz Works and Lives

> For all its promise, then, the future of the embattled Ethnographic community cannot be all that bright. There still seems to be among users and consumers alike, considerable confusion about what sort of authority it has....However diplomatic its users might wish or need to be in the face of a positivist culture's latent hostility, the method itself will inevitably be both threatening and radical. It will not mix and match. (313) Stephen North The Making of Knowledge in Composition.

> I call ethnography a meditative vehicle because we come to it neither as to a map of knowledge nor as a guide to action, nor even for enlightenment. We come to it as the start of a different kind of journey. (140) Stephen Tyler Post-Modern Ethnography

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Behind issues of reliability and validity and ethnographic story telling lurk issues of definition. What is ethnography? What should be sandwiched between Clifford Geertz' poles of quantum mechanics and

Italian opera? Does ethnography have methodological authority in composition studies? Why--like oil and water--don't ethnographic and positivistic research "mix and match?" Is ethnography really such a different kind of journey?

In writing research, ethnography is here to stay--for a while anyway. In 1987 Stephen North claimed the community of ethnographic research was one with edges but no center; in the same year, I began my own ethnographic research project. Since I completed that dissertation in late 1988 and published a revised version of my work in 1990, I have watched the surge, development, and now--perhaps--the cresting of a wave of similar projects. Studies labeled ethnographic, naturalistic, case study, and so on, are well represented in RTE bibliographies of the last several years; this year's 4Cs program presents more reports and, in general, much talk about ethnography, including this panel and a postconvention workshop.

In 1987, however, I felt I was inventing ethnography on my own. Aside from Shirley Brice Heath's Ways with Words, Glenda Bissex's GNYS at WRK, Sondra Perl and Nancy Wilson's Through Teachers' Eyes and a few teacher-researcher articles, my "Bibles" were written for social scientists and anthropologists and I had few studies to study. The methods texts I did have--Goetz and LeCompte and Miles and Huberman--were valuable. They told me how to design research and collect data--how to "write it down"--and I scoured them for hints on ways to adapt my borrowed methodology to my own field, writing research.

I learned to design research, and I designed in, I thought, reliability. I would "write it down" through field-notes, personal memos, copious participant-observer data collection--video, audio, interview transcripts, and so on. I knew I would increase validity through rigorous data analysis--charting, cross-checking (triangulation), coding, and so on.

Along the way, over a thirty month period, as you can imagine, I became less sure, less able to translate methods book injunctions into research realities. Questions arose. Not just what is ethnography, but why did "doing ethnography" seem to have elements of "doing literature" and "doing creative writing" that no one and no methods book was mentioning? Or, how could research that seemed more and more to rely on my subjectivity, interpretations, and, finally, story-telling skills be a vehicle for reliable and valid results?

Ethnography <u>is</u> problematic due to these and the many other challenges that it presents. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz explains:

> ...[that] the writing of ethnography involves telling stories, making pictures, concocting symbolisms, and deploying tropes is commonly resisted, often fiercely, because of a confusion, endemic in the West since Plato at least, of the imagined with the imaginary, the fictional with the false, making things out with making them up. (140)

First of all, I did not realize that "writing it down" was an interpretive act although I knew that "writing it up" would be. I assumed, and my methods texts and rhetoric program's general grounding in positivistic research led me to believe, that the data I

collected would be representative, reliable, whole. Then, scrupulous careful analysis, triangulation, and constant self-questioning would bring me to a reliable and valid understanding of another culture, in this case, retraining teachers of college writing. It was hard to see, at first, the degree to which "writing it down" is interpretive, that "what is written 'down' is treated as data in the writing 'up'" and that "both phases of the work involve the creation of textual materials" (Atkinson 61).

Although I knew that surely no one else could step into the same river of my research project for a second time, go back to the same situation I had encountered, I believed they could replicate my research to the extent that I carefully explained my methods--that I had collected so many tapes, asked so many subjects so many questions in just the same order, and so on.

I did not understand then the degree to which all research relies on tropes, researcher personas, and persuasions, that all research methods and research reports are rhetorical. That is not surprising since positivistic methods do not invite question; in fact, ethnographic methods are themselves suspect to the degree to which they question the prevailing tradition; this is the dominant culture's latent hostility mentioned by North. Yet positivism, I would learn, is a position, and a very firmly entrenched one. William Firestone explains that:

> Scientific writing is a stripped-down, cool style that avoids ornamentation, often stating conclusions as propositions or formulae. Forms of data presentation are supposed to be interchangeable....This absence of style turns out to actually be

> a rhetorical device in its own right (Frye, 1957). The use of propositions, for instance, is a means to empty language of emotion and convince the reader of the writer's disengagement from the analysis. If one of the threats to the validity of a conclusion comes from the writer's own biases, as is considered to be the case in science, then any technique that projects a lack of emotion has considerable persuasive power. (17)

Just as scientific writing gains power from the use of cool style, the writing of ethnographic stories has often been viewed as lacking in rigor and validity when writers indulge in what I'll call its "warm" style--vivid subjective narratives that are, inevitably, interpretive.

Throughout my study then, the problems of "writing it up" were so omnipresent and so clear they obscured all issues of writing it down. And writing it up is indeed difficult. For instance, it was impossible to move from the hard data of interview transcripts to the "warm" shaped descriptions I was weaving, without now seeing the subjective nature of my enterprise. I worried that my stories and narratives while "convincing" would be suspect. Starting in positivism, I too confused the <u>imagined with the imaginary</u>, the <u>fictional with false</u>, <u>making things out</u>--people, situations, patterns, understandings--<u>with making them up</u>. To anchor my creations, I weighed down my six-hundred page dissertation with one-hundred pages of charts, analyzes, transcripts and raw data; data that did, by the way, help me construct my <u>imagined</u>, <u>fictional</u>, and <u>made out</u> understandings, but data that could never "prove" them.

And "writing it up" proved to be more problematic than "writing it down," since "writing up" an ethnographic narrative includes creating a believable and interesting authorial identity. Research validity rests--to a great degree--on this constructed author. Geertz claims (somewhat humorously) that:

> "Being There" authorially, palpably on the page, is in any case as difficult a trick to bring off as "being there" personally, which after all demands at the minimum hardly more than a travel booking and permission to land; a willingness to endure a certain amount of loneliness, invasion of privacy, and physical discomfort, a relaxed way with odd growths and unexplained fevers; a capacity to stand still for artistic insults, and the sort of patience that can support an endless search for invisible needles in infinite haystacks. And the authorial sort of being there is getting more difficult all the time.... 23-24

Being there authorially becomes increasingly difficult in the postmodern world, and I would argue in the world of writing research where the line between our own and the studied culture may be a fine one (someone else's classroom but a classroom like those we have known). Often little but our methodological claims separate us from the teachers we study. That is, we claim more expertise than they--than their long-term residence in the culture--through our "objectivity" and "methods." Yet those very methods are constructed, interpretive:

> ....this issue, negotiating the passage from what one has been through "out there" to what one says "back here," is not psychological in character. It is literary. It arises for

> anyone who adopts what one may call, in a serious pun, the I-witnessing approach to the construction of cultural descriptions....To place the reach of your sensibility...at the center of your ethnography, is to pose for yourself a distinctive sort of textbuilding problem: rendering your account credible through rendering your person so....To be a convincing "I-witness," one must, so it seems, first become a convincing "I." (Geertz 78-79)

To become a convincing "I" is a primary task of all writing research ethnographers, yet the "I" of the dissertation is rarely convincing. The writing research dissertation must be author-evacuated (Geertz' term) since, generally, it must convince through an uneasy alliance--interpretive narratives garnishing a pseudo-positivistic banquet. Mary Louise Pratt describes the results of the author-evacuated voice:

> For the lay person, such as my self, the main evidence of a problem is the simple fact that ethnographic writing tends to be surprisingly boring. How, one asks constantly, could such interesting people doing such interesting things produce such dull books? (33)

The benefit of jettisoning the cumbersome data of the pseudo-positivistic proof, of moving from the position of "outside knower" to "I-witnessing" writer includes finding a more powerful way to speak. The mix and match writing research dissertation ethnography has too many bad habits--it is confusing, cumbersome and often downright boring, like most writing that provides merely an

initiation into the academy. In author-saturated texts, those that acknowledge their constructedness and invoke authority through overtly rhetorical and persuasive techniques, there is a better chance for engaging a reader in our sometimes confusing and always modest cultural journey. Ethnographic reports become, to quote Geertz once again--places where we learn "what it is to open (a bit) the consciousness of one group of people to (something of) the life-form of another, and in that way to (something of) their own" (Geertz 143).

These days, it is necessary for <u>all</u> ethnographers, novice and expert alike, to I-witness and to construct an authorial voice that can adequately tell needed writing research stories. To avoid confusion, we can refuse to mix and match research positions; our research needs to begin and end in subjective authority. This authority, until now, has been earned primarily by time in the field (the greater field of composition studies), not by written experimentation. Or those voices who are allowed to experiment are those who have already gained prestige; for example, the experimental authoritative I-witnessing voice is found in singular humanistic research like Mike Rose's <u>Lives on the Boundary</u> and more recently Peter Elbow's <u>What Is English</u>. Novice ethnographers have not--for many reasons--had the freedom to take the risks and explore the "writing it up" avenues available to composition studies' most well-known researchers.

Writing researchers, then, have yet to write the necessary research meta-narratives--the discussions of how ethnographic

research actually gets completed and accepted by our community. These would help guide the new graduate program ethnographer. That novice ethnographer studies writers, writing classrooms, or writing teachers with the aid of dissertation committees--members of which may have completed no and read few ethnographies themselves. The novice studies methods textbooks and does ethnography; she tries to be there. With little guidance, she must write to new audiences, assert her authority and methodology, and produce thick descriptions and convincing narrations. She learns she is "telling stories" and "structuring narratives," and she also learns that these narratives appear radical or unreliable to traditional research strands.

She does it anyway. The lure of ethnography is powerful and real and appeals, I believe, to our profession for several reasons. Ethnography is subversive--it challenges the dominant positivist view of making knowledge. It demands attention to human subjectivity and allows for author-saturated reconstructions and examinations of a world; in fact, it is grounded by definition in phenomenological understandings of knowledge and meaning-making. Equally, it is generative and creative because writing research ethnographies are overtly rhetorical; they are producing informed stories and arguments about the world. In fact, Linda Brodkey suggests that we should write active, critical ethnographies intended to change institutions. She eschews the smoothly constructed story in which the narrator seems an "instrument rather than the agent of the narrative" (72) and suggests instead that "a narrative voice is made most audible by interrupting the flow of the story and calling attention to the fact of narration" (73). Narrative can be

effectively self-conscious.

Additionally, since ethnographic arguments are built by different means than those used in quantitative research (arguments there, we need to remember, are also rhetorical but less transparently so) and since these means challenge conventions of scientific reporting--thick description often cannot be presented in the 10-15 page research article, or if it is, readers cannot expect reports to follow the same old format--extensive discussion of methodology, data collection, etc.

Writing research ethnographers, as I have suggested, continue to borrow heavily from the developing discussions in sociology and anthropology. Those discussions are naturally one step ahead of ours since we are translating from their longer tradition. Writing researchers are mainly at this time getting into the "field" and starting to ask if and then how we should conduct context-based studies even as anthropologists are focusing on questions of discourse, on "writing it up." For those individuals a postmodernist discussion is in full swing. For instance, are there new ways to evaluate the qualities of ethnographic texts? John Van Maanen suggests literary standards, arguing:

> Literary standards are different, but they are not shabby or second-rate. When taken seriously they may require even more from an ethnographer than those formulated by the profession. Fidelity, coherence, generosity, wisdom, imagination, honesty, respect, and verisimilitude are standards of a high order. Moreover, they are not exclusionary ones, since those who read ethnography for pleasure and general knowledge are as able to

> judge whether they are achieved as those who read for professional development. Ethnographies that reach such standards in the minds of many readers are certainly far fewer than those that obtain collegial standards. They are not less worthy. (33)

The issue of evaluating our "factional texts" (Geertz' term) with borrowed literary criteria has come about because anthropologists have received memorable proofs of the constructedness--the factionality--of the core texts in their field. Anthropological narratives have been around long enough to allow their authors to contradict and challenge themselves.

For instance, James Clifford discusses Bronislaw Malinowski's A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term. Published 45 years after after Malinowski's original, field-defining research among the Trobrianders (published as Argonauts of the Western Pacific) this work alone sets the problems of I-witnessing in bold relief. In the Diary, Malinowski shows himself to be less than the noble ethnographer; rather he is ambivalent, lonely, obsessed, and his metacommentary proves that "ethnographic comprehension (a coherent position of sympathy and hermeneutic engagement) is better seen as a creation of ethnographic writing than a consistent quality of ethnographic experience" (Clifford "On Ethnographic Self-Fashioning" 110). Malinowsky clearly "evokes" and "interprets" in exceedingly different ways in the two documents, neither of which we would like to do without today. In the same way, we could wish to have a writer's diary from Mike Rose or ethnographical meta-narratives from

Shirley Brice Heath.

Tales about tales already abound in anthropological ethnography and we need to encourage them in writing research. John Van Maanen calls the traditional ethnography a realist tale and distinguishes two other forms: confessional tales----commentary on realist works--and impressionistic tales--comments on the doing of ethnography, that is metacommentary. My dissertation was realist just as my talk today aims toward a mixture of confessional and impressionistic. Tales about tales and narratives about narratives allow us to "treat all textual accounts based on fieldwork as partial constructions" (Clifford "On Ethnographic Self-Fashioning" 97). That is, treat them as they truly are.

As we tell tales about tales and narratives about narratives in writing research, we find that metacommentary helps us avoid positivistic and subjective mis-mixing and matching. We learn the reasons for transforming "data" into stories that matter, journeys to be taken. Yes, reliable and valid stories are possible and needed, as well as stories of writing it down, writing it up, telling where we went and what we thought about all along the way.

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